

China Policy Study Group

BROADSHEET

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THE MEANING OF TACHING

The recent national conference on Learning from Taching in Industry is likely to be seen in history as marking the opening of a new stage in China's socialist development.

Since 1964 over half a million Chinese workers and cadres have responded to chairman Mao's call by going to study Taching at first hand. Like its counterpart for agriculture, Tachai, Taching is a living example of what can be achieved through self-reliance and arduous struggle, but on a scale many hundreds of times greater. It can fairly be described as a pilot scheme for the China of the future.

This is a big claim; how can it be justified? In 'Principles of Communism' Engels long ago envisaged 'communities of citizens engaged in industry as well as agriculture, and combining the advantages of both urban and rural life without the one-sidedness and disadvantages of either'. Because Taching

was created out of the wilderness, it was possible from the beginning to develop it on these lines. So, instead of concentrations of industry and densely populated consumer cities for the workers and their families, it consists of industrial installations set in grasslands and villages whose residents cultivate the productive farming areas that surround them, which they themselves have opened up.

Taching is outstanding (a) as an example of large-scale self-reliance, which has discredited the foreign myth that China was 'oil-poor'; (b) for the pioneering role of its workers and their wives, not only in opening up the oilfield itself but in cultivating the land; (c) for its successful establishment of a new type of urban-rural community; and (d) for making a key contribution to China's development.

Perhaps most significant as a pointer to the future is the political, economic

and administrative organisation of Taching. The Revolutionary Committee, under the overall leadership of the local branch of the Communist Party, is the organ of local government, taking charge of industry, agriculture, commerce, militia, education and culture. In this respect it is like a large commune.

The commune principle of collective ownership by the working people is applied to farm-work with distribution according to the workpoints system. The oilfield itself, however, is a state enterprise which pays wages according to a national scale and hands over its profits to the state. But the incomes of those engaged in agriculture, which is not state-owned, do not differ much from those employed directly by the state in the oil enterprise. Taching has thus advanced a significant way along the road to abolishing the 'three great differences' (between mental and manual labour, industry and agriculture, town and country).

PRODUCTIVE FORCES AND RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relation of production, or — what is but a legal expression for the same thing — with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.'

Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)

Marxism seeks to explain the phenomenon of class and class struggle in society as an expression of conflicts and contradictions within the economic basis of society — as a product of the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production. How can this theoretical framework of historical materialism be applied to the understanding of socialist society? This question is now the subject of an intense theoretical debate.

Revisionism

At the basis of the Soviet account of socialist society is the idea that socialist revolution, by abolishing private ownership of the means of production, thereby abolishes the material

and economic basis of class; and thus class struggle is destined to 'die out' as the productive forces develop. In recent years this account has been widely criticized and rejected as revisionist — as a mechanistic and 'economistic' distortion of Marxism. In its interpretation of the Marxist account of historical development, this account places all the emphasis on the productive forces. These are regarded as the 'motor of history' — the sole dynamic element in historical change. This is what the Chinese call 'the theory of productive forces', and it is associated with 'the theory of the dying out of class struggle'. As the productive forces develop and become more social in character through the development of new machinery and new techniques, they come into conflict with the system of productive relations which is embodied in the system of individual ownership. So runs this account. After a certain point, the established relations of production, the system of ownership, comes into contradiction to the further development of the productive forces and becomes a fetter upon this development. Socialism abolishes private ownership of the means of production, thus bringing the relations of production (the system of ownership) into harmony with the social character of the productive forces. The economic basis of class is thus abolished and class struggle thus destined to die out.

Of course, this is not to say that all class conflict immediately ceases after the expropriation of private property. On the con-

trary, as all Marxists recognise and as all historical experience shows, in the first period of socialism, the newly formed society has powerful enemies to contend with. Furthermore, the habits, customs, beliefs and attitudes of the old society are still active, and they continually hamper the development of the new society. Nevertheless, within the socialist society itself the material basis of class has, according to this account, been abolished. The major task for socialist society ceases to be the political one of class struggle, and becomes the purely economic and technical one of developing the productive forces, of 'modernizing' the economy. Thus, through the development of the productive forces under a socialist system of ownership, the old class distinctions are supposed to die out automatically, creating the conditions for 'the withering away of the state' and the transition to full communism.

Mao's Contribution

However, the actual historical development of socialist societies, including the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, blatantly contradicts this account.

One of Mao's most important contributions to Marxism has been to recognise clearly, both in theory and in practice, that class differences and class struggle continue throughout the historical epoch of socialism. In 1957, in 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People', Mao wrote:

'In China, although in the main socialist transformation has been completed with respect to the system of ownership, and although the large-scale and turbulent class struggles of the masses characteristic of the previous revolutionary periods have in the main come to an end . . . the class struggle is by no means over. The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the class struggle between the different political forces, and the class struggle in the ideological field between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie will continue to be long and tortuous and at times will even become very acute. The proletariat seeks to transform the world according to its own world outlook, and so does the bourgeoisie. In this respect, the question of which will win out, socialism or capitalism, is still not really settled.'

(*Four Essays on Philosophy*, p.115, Peking)

The class struggle does not automatically 'die out'. Constructing socialism is not merely a matter of modernising the economy; equally and more importantly it involves continuing the revolution, continuing the class struggle of the proletariat and its allies, under the new conditions of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and of socialism. The experience of the Chinese revolution has demonstrated, in the most brilliant and unprecedented fashion, the truth and the practical importance of these claims.

According to Mao, socialist society must be analysed within the basic framework of historical materialism:

'The basic contradictions in socialist society are still those between the relations of production and the productive forces and between the superstructure and the economic base.'

(*op. cit.*, p.92)

To see how this can apply to socialist society it is essential to understand the Marxist account of the economic basis of society in a concrete and dialectical way. The productive forces and the relations of production must be seen as two contradictory aspects of a single totality: the productive activity of men in society. In particular, the relations of production must not be entirely subordinated to the legal relationship of ownership, and they must not be entirely subordinated to the forces of production. Furthermore, the forces of production must not be conceived abstractly, merely as machinery and techniques. I will take each of these points in turn.

The Relations of Production

It is a mistake to equate the relations of production with the legal relationship of ownership and not to recognise other

aspects. The seizure of political power by the proletariat and the transformation of the system of ownership is, of course, the necessary precondition for a socialist society. However, it must be seen that the abolition of private ownership is the *beginning* and not the *end* of 'the epoch of social revolution' to which Marx refers (see quote at head of article). The process of socialist revolution involves not just a change in the system of ownership, but also a thorough and total transformation of all the social relations of production and also of 'the entire immense superstructure'.

'Socialism is the declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transition point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, to the abolition of all the relationships of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of all the ideas that result from these social relations.'

(Marx, *The Class Struggles in France 1848-50*)

A material basis for 'class distinctions generally' does continue to exist, even after the abolition of private property in the means of production. It continues to exist in the social relations of production, which must now be understood in a concrete way as the concrete basis and embodiment of the system of ownership itself. Indeed, on closer scrutiny it becomes clear that even the system of ownership in the first stages of socialist society has its bourgeois features and 'defects'. Collective property continues to exist alongside state property, 'property of the whole people'. Even the transformation of the system of ownership is completed only, as Mao says, 'in the main'.

Certainly, ownership is a vital and essential aspect of the concrete social relations which constitute the material basis of class distinctions; but class and class struggle in society are not dependent on this aspect alone. Class differences are embodied in all aspects of the social relations of production, as Lenin recognises when he writes:

'Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relations (in most cases fixed and formulated by law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and consequently by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it.'

(*'A Great Beginning'*, *Selected Works*, p486)

Socialism — the transition to classless society — must involve the transformation of all the aspects of the relations of production mentioned here by Lenin: not only a change in the system of ownership, but also a transformation of the relations of distribution and in the organisation and division of labour. These changes involve a long historical process. Until they are completed, bourgeois social relations continue to exist in socialist society and class struggle continues under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Such class struggle has a material basis *within* socialist society itself. Bourgeois forces continue to arise not just because of *external* influences, or of attitudes and habits from the *past* — they are continually 'engendered' anew *within* socialist society on the basis of the bourgeois aspects of the relations of production which persist under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

Underlying the revisionist theory that class struggle will automatically die out under socialism is the reduction of the Marxist concept of the productive relations to the sole aspect of legal ownership. The social basis of class becomes merely a matter of the private ownership of the means of production. This has the effect of isolating the phenomenon of ownership and making an abstraction out of it. Marx, by contrast, sees property as a concrete social phenomenon:

'In the real world . . . the division of labour and all M. Proudhon's other categories are social relations forming in their entirety what is today known as *property*: outside these relations bourgeois property is nothing but a metaphysical or juristic illusion.'

(Marx, Letter o P.V. Annenkov, 28th Dec. 1846)

Productive forces and Productive relations

The significance of the relations of production in understanding the Marxist account of class has been strongly emphasised by a number of recent writers. In opposing Soviet revisionism they have rightly stressed that the relations of production retain bourgeois characteristics, and that a sphere of 'bourgeois right' continues to exist, even after private ownership has been abolished. However, it is equally important not to stress the role of the productive relations and of bourgeois right in a one-sided way, and not to make abstractions of them. This can result in an equal and opposite distortion of Marxism: a revisionism 'from the left', as opposed to the revisionism 'from the right' which we have so far been considering. This is a matter which the current struggle against 'the Gang of Four' in China is serving to clarify.

The material and economic basis of class and class struggle cannot be found *either* in the productive forces alone, if these are viewed in abstraction from the social relations of production, or in the social production relations alone, if these are abstracted from the forces of production. No, the material basis of class struggle lies in the interaction, the concrete unity and contradiction, within the economic base, between the forces and relations of production. This is what Bettelheim is saying when he writes:

'The field in which Lenin considered that "the main features of what is most important, most fundamental, have not yet been completed" was that of "the creation of the economic basis of the socialist system". This was to be interpreted later as referring above all to the low level of the productive forces in Russia, from which it was deduced that the main thing was to "build the material foundations" of socialism. There is no doubt that Lenin did have this aspect of the revolution's task in mind: it really "is a task without which progress towards socialism is not possible. But when Lenin spoke of the "economic basis" of socialism he did not have in mind *only* the development of the productive forces, but also, and especially, the *socialist transformation of production relations*. These are two associated tasks which have to be accomplished by the socialist revolution, two tasks which the Chinese Communist Party expresses in this concise formula: "Grasp Revolution and Promote Production". These two tasks are dialectically interconnected. They constitute two contradictory aspects of a single task'.

(C. Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR: First Period: 1917-23*, Harvester Press, London p.443)

Bettelheim has analysed the class struggles in socialist society in a path-breaking way. However, and despite the clear statement of his just quoted, it seems to me that there is some unclarity on this matter in Bettelheim's work. At other times (and it may even be said that these are more characteristic of his thought) he writes as if the development of the productive forces were entirely secondary to class struggle and to the relations of production. For example, in *Cultural Revolution and Industrial Organisation in China*, he writes:

'In the combination productive forces/production relations, the latter play the dominant role by imposing the conditions under which the productive forces are reproduced. Conversely, the development of the productive forces never directly determines the transformation of the production relations; this transformation is always the focus of intervention by the contending classes — that is, of class struggle. The struggle for the socialist transformation of the production relations cannot be waged in the name of the "development of the productive forces", since the forms this development assumes reflect class relationships and are determined by the class interests, perceptions, aspirations, and ideas of the contending classes'. (pp.91-2)

Bettelheim is correct to oppose the 'theory of productive forces', with its abstract and one-sided emphasis on the role of the development of the productive forces in shaping history. But to oppose this theory with the opposite theory — which we could call the 'theory of production relations' — that the production relations are always the principal aspect, is simply to embrace the opposite error. To isolate *either* the productive

forces or the productive relations, and to make either absolutely subordinate to the other, is to falsify the dialectical and concrete relation between them.

This is not to deny that in all contradictions there is a principal and a secondary aspect. But, as Mao says,

'This situation is not static; the principal and the non-principal aspects of a contradiction transform themselves into each other and the nature of the thing changes accordingly'.

(Mao Tsetung, 'On Contradiction', *Four Essays on Philosophy*, p.54)

And then in a much quoted passage, Mao goes on to say: 'Some people think that this is not true of certain contradictions. For instance, in the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the productive forces are the principal aspect; in the contradiction between theory and practice, practice is the principal aspect; in the contradiction between the economic base and the superstructure, the economic base is the principal aspect; and there is no change in their respective positions. This is the mechanical materialist conception, not the dialectical materialist conception. True, the productive forces, practice and the economic base generally play the principal and decisive role; whoever denies this is not a materialist. But it must also be admitted that in certain conditions, such aspects as the relations of production, theory and the superstructure in turn manifest themselves in the principal and decisive role. When it is impossible for the productive forces to develop without a change in the relations of production, then the change in the relations of production plays the principal and decisive role. . . Are we going against materialism when we say this? No. The reason is that while we recognise that in the general development of history the material determines the mental and social being determines social consciousness, we also — and indeed must — recognise the reaction of mental on material things, of social consciousness on social being and of the superstructure on the economic base. This does not go against materialism; on the contrary, it avoids mechanical materialism and firmly upholds dialectical materialism'.

(*ibid.*, pp.58-9)

What Mao is saying here is aimed primarily at the mechanistic 'theory of productive forces', but it surely applies equally to the view that the relations of production always play the dominant role.

To ignore the influence of the forces of production in historical development and to imagine that productive relations are always dominant, is to stand things on their head — it is idealism. Marx, by contrast, emphasises that the relations of production are themselves ultimately the product of the productive forces.

'M. Proudhon the economist understands very well that men make cloth, linen or silk materials in definite relations of production. But what he has not understand is that these definite social relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc. Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist'.

(Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, p.95)

We must not make an abstraction of the relations of production, but regard them dialectically, as in concrete unity with the productive forces. Transformation of the relations of production and the development of the forces of production must necessarily go hand in hand. The relations of production comprise the sphere of Right, which Hegel regarded as the sphere of the Will. However, the sphere of Right and of the Will, isolated and abstracted from its material basis, is an illusion. The relations of production cannot simply be transformed *at will*. Bourgeois right cannot be restricted simply by being militant and having 'the correct line' — there are real, physical limitations, in the shape of the actually existing productive

forces and the practical and economic necessities that they impose, which condition and contradict the political dynamic of the relations of production and of the will. Not to recognise this is to abandon materialism.

Why, then, does class struggle persist in socialist society? First of all, it is very important to see that the relations of production are not completely transformed with the abolition of private ownership and a development of the productive forces; and it is due to Bettelheim principally that we in the West have come to appreciate this so clearly. Nevertheless, we must go on to ask: Why must bourgeois relations of production and bourgeois right continue to exist in socialist society? What is the basis of their necessity? On this, Marx writes:

'These defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society. Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby. In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly — only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety . . .'

(Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme, Selected Works*, p.320)

The restriction and abolition of bourgeois right must go hand in hand with the development of the productive forces, and it is an illusion to believe that it can be achieved in isolation.

The Forces of Production

As well as distorting the Marxist concept of the relations of production, revisionism also has an impoverished picture of the productive forces. According to the revisionist theory of productive forces, the major task of socialist society is to develop the productive forces; but this task is conceived in a one-sided and mechanical fashion. The productive forces are regarded as comprising only machinery and techniques, and thus the development of production is seen solely in *technical* and *economic* terms. This is the theoretical basis of revisionist policies: abandoning the class struggle and placing techniques, experts and economics 'in command'.

However, machinery and techniques must not be seen in abstraction. A machine requires working men to build, operate and maintain it — only in this context is it a productive force. In considering the productive forces of a society, it is therefore vital to recognise that these comprise not only machinery and techniques, but also men, with the necessary skills and organisation to operate them. Indeed, as Marx says:

'Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself.'

(Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, p.151)

The creative initiative and energy of the working people is the most gigantic productive force. 'Of all things in the world, people are most precious', says Mao. Revisionism is blind to this, and to the fact that the working people themselves are the greatest productive force. It pictures the productive forces as merely machinery and techniques, and men as subordinated to them as their appendages. It is mechanistic and economic. The development of the productive forces is not a merely economic and technical matter of modernising production processes. It is also, and more importantly, a *political* process of mobilising and organising the energies and creativity of the people. This is the Marxist view and the great lesson of the experience of socialism in China.

'Marxist-Leninists have always maintained that in world history it is not technique but man, the masses of people, that determine the fate of mankind. There was a theory current for a time among some people in China before and during the War of Resistance to Japanese Aggression, which

was known as the 'weapons-mean-everything theory'... Comrade Mao Tsetung pointed out that the most abundant source of strength in war lay in the masses, and that a people's army organised by the awakened and united masses of the people would be invincible throughout the world. . . . An awakened people will always find new ways to counteract a reactionary superiority in arms and win victory for themselves. This was so in past history, it is so at present, and it will still be so in the future'.

(*Long Live Leninism!*, pp.19-20)

However, it is important here too not to stress human initiative and creativity one-sidedly, and not to make an abstraction of them. For, like all human characteristics and features, initiative and creativity are themselves a product of human productive activity, which is based ultimately upon certain machinery and techniques. Without these man would no longer be man, and his creativity and initiative would be reduced to a sub-human level.

In this context, we must be careful to understand correctly what is meant by, 'in world history it is not technique but man . . . that determines the fate of mankind'. In particular, it is important to see that it is not *opposing* techniques to man, and in no way is it negating the role of technology, either in warfare or in history. In no way does the article denigrate science and technology nor does Marxism. On the contrary. Indeed, this very passage outlines and develops the Marxist and Leninist attitude to scientific and technological progress:

'What . . . does the development of natural science and the advance of technology augur for the capitalist system? Marx and Lenin held that this could only augur a new social revolution'.

(*Long Live Leninism!* p.16)

The article quotes Engels' 'Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx':

'Science was for Marx an historically dynamic, revolutionary force'.

And it is an 'historically dynamic, revolutionary force' because it leads to the development of the productive forces, which brings them into contradiction with the relations of production. The article quotes from Wilhelm Liebknecht's *Reminiscences of Marx*:

'Marx made fun of the victorious European reaction which imagined that it had stifled the revolution and did not suspect that natural science was preparing a new revolution. King Steam, who had revolutionized the world in the previous century, was coming to the end of his reign and another incomparably greater revolutionary would take his place, the electric spark. . . . The consequences are unpredictable. The economic revolution must be followed by a political one, for the latter is only the expression of the former'.

The contradiction between the development of the productive forces and the relations of production continues in the period of socialism; and it continues to be a revolutionary one: the motor of history and the material basis of the class struggle. This is not to say that socialism is not different from capitalism. On the contrary:

'Contradictions in a socialist society are fundamentally different from those in the old societies, such as capitalist society. In capitalist society contradictions find expression in acute antagonisms and conflicts, in sharp class struggle; they cannot be resolved by the capitalist system itself and can only be resolved by socialist revolution. On the contrary, the case is different with contradictions in socialist society, where they are not antagonistic and can be resolved one after another by the socialist system itself.'

(Mao Tsetung, 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions. . .', *Four Essays*, p.92)

Contradictions among the people — class and class struggle — continue throughout the period of socialism and reflect the contradictions in the economic base between the forces and the relations of production. It is in this way that Marxism understands socialist society; and it is one of Mao's greatest contributions to Marxism to have developed this theory for the first time in explicit and clear-cut terms. SEAN SAYERS